DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 260 470 CS 505 012

AUTHOR Gordon, Ronald D.
TITLE Empathy: The State of the Art and Science.
PUB DATE 10 Aug 85
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the International Conference of the World Communication Association (Baguio, Philippines, August 10, 1985).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Communication (Thought Transfer); *Empathy; *Interpersonal Communication; *Listening; Listening Habits; *Listening Skills; Speech Communication

ABSTRACT

Despite the almost complete lack of research addressing a theoretical understanding of empathy or ways to increase human empathy, empathy is a central component of effective human communication. Seen as a key social science phenomenon, it is viewed, along with power, as an inextricable component of human dynamics, and, in its relationship with altruism, possibly plays a causal role. A problem with research on empathy has been a lack of conceptual clarity. Three ways to improve empathetic listening are to avoid judgment, give the speaker time to speak without interruption, and focus on the speaker. Many of the helping professions have attempted training programs aimed at increasing the empathetic communication skills of practitioners in these fields. However, being told to listen empathetically is not the same as being taught to listen with empathy; and in critique of the empathy skills programs that are conducted within the helping professions, a significantly raised test score does not mean that empathy has been attained. Although empathetic communication is a complex subject matter, skills associated with empathy and active listening have been perceived as being more important than skills associated with critical or deliberative listening. (EL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED260470

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

Empathy:

The State of the Art and Science

Ronald D. Gordon, Ph.D.
The College of Arts and Sciences
Speech Discipline
The University of Hawaii, Hilo
96720

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Ronald D. Gordon

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Prepared for the International Conference of the
World Communication Association

August 10, 1985

Baguio, Republic of the Philippines

CS 505012

Empathy:

The State of the Art and Science

Abstract

In spite of the recognized importance of empathy in human communication, it is curious that we have so loose a grasp on the fundamental nature of empathy, and on ways of increasing the empathic tendencies of human communicators. As recently as 1983 there was not a single journal article in the speech communication literature primarily dealing with empathy or empathy-building, and this situation has not appreciably changed since that time. In addition, the recommendations offered on empathic listening by our listening texts fall short of constituting a systematic, comprehensive approach to empathy development. The present paper offers a brief review, and a call for attention to this important area within communication studies.

Empathy:

The State of the Art and Science

A university colleague of mine (who chairs a business management program) has the following sign in his office: "When things go wrong, as they usually will, and your daily road seems all uphill; When funds are low and debts are high, When you try to smile but can only cry; And you really feel like you'd like to quit. . . Don't run to me: I don't give a shit!" While most of us have undoubtedly at times had a similar internal reaction to the self-disclosed plights of others, we would also tend to agree that, in the long run, empathy is a central component of effective human communication. At the one-to-one communication level, for instance, the best available research indicates that empathy is at the very nucleus of interpersonal communication competence.[1] At the highest level of communication, cross-cultural communication, empathy is also considered to assume a vital role.[2] In fact, at each communication level, from intrapersonal to interpersonal to small group to public to organizational to mass to intercultural and cross-cultural, empathy is informally or formally believed to play a major role in fostering successful and satisfying outcomes.

In spite of the recognized importance of empathy in human communication, it is curious that we have so loose a grasp on the fundamental nature of empathy, and on ways of increasing the empathic tendencies of human communicators. As recently as 1983, Arnett and Nakagawa reported that they were unable to locate a single journal article in the speech communication literature that primarily dealt with the topic of empathy, and a DIALOG search of the PSYCINFO and ERIC databases reveals that this situation essentially remains unchanged.[3]

We in communication, however, are not alone in our limited treatment of the concept of empathy. Dr. Kenneth Clark, in his 1979 address upon receiving the APA Award for Distinguished Contribution to Psychology, noted a similar lack of examination of empathy by academic psychology.[4] While he found a large number of annual citations under "empathy" in the research literature, Clark concluded that very few of those pursuits actually addressed a theoretical understanding of empathy, or ways to increase human empathy.

Clark reminisces about an earlier address he gave years before, when he received the APA's Kurt Lewin Award. At that time he agreed with Lord Bertrand Russell that "power" is the central concept of the social sciences, much as "energy" is the basic concept in physics. Clark goes on to note that his conception has evolved since that earlier time, and that he now sees empathy as "a key social science phenomenon," and views "empathy and power as inextricable components of human dynamics."[5] He construes empathy as the capacity of an individual to feel the needs, aspirations, frustrations, happinesses, anxieties, hurts, and other emotions of other persons as if they were one's own. Clark perceives empathy to be the opposite of rigid egocentricity, and a capacity unique in degree to humans, probably due to the evolution of the anterior frontal lobes of the human brain. When human agents have power, but not empathy, serious problems arise, for "this lack of simple expanded empathy is in the eyes of this observer the basis of social tensions, conflicts, violence, terrorism, and war."[6]

As Underwood and Moore have recently noted, the expected relation between empathy and altruistic action makes conceptual sense, yet at the time of their 1982 comprehensive review of the literature there were only two papers involving the experimental manipulation of empathy as related to altruistic behavior.[7] On the basis of these papers, "We feel that there is good reason to believe that empathy plays a causal role in its relationship with altruism."[8] Ezra Stotland

and his colleagues, in their review of research into the association between empathy and altruism, concluded that "In all studies just cited, high empathy, however defined, was related to helping, consideration for others, and nonaggression, etc. However, these studies showed that such altruistic behavior is also dependent on some form of motivational factor such as sense of responsibility, knowledge of what to do, a tendency to act instrumentally in general, permission from an experimenter. . ." etc.[9] In sum, empathy would seem to contribute to nonegocentric prosocial behavior, but much research remains to be done to identify intervening variables (and to overcome methodological limitations of previous research in the area).[10]

One of the problems surrounding empathy research has been a lack of conceptual clarity. What one researcher has defined as "empathy," another has not. A terminological jungle has impeded clear progress, prompting Redmond in 1983 to call for order in the area.[11] Redmond suggested that the term "decentering" be used as the overarching umbrella concept, with two divisions beneath, one pertaining to "cognitive decentering" and the other to "affective decentering," or "empathy." Unlike in Redmond's proposed schema, where "affective-decentering" and "empathy" become synonymous, this writer is more drawn to Underwood and Moore's more conventional conception, where the term "empathy" is related to "affective perspective-taking" (or what Redmond called "affective decentering"), but not synonomous with it.[12] One can recognize and even understand the affective state of another (affectively decenter or perspective-take), yet still not emotionally participate in that state (empathize). Both cognitive and affective perspective-taking (equivalent terms for cognitive and affective decentering) contribute to the empathic state, in this view, but do not constitute it.

It is important to untangle the conceptual knots in this area as cleanly and swiftly as possible, and to move into the most crucial phase, the development of

methodologies for empathy-building. The principal payoff from empathy research will come when we know how to more skillfully enable communicators to choose empathic response tendencies even in the midst of conflictual social and cultural interaction.

Recently a number of new listening texts have appeared on the market; in 1983, however, John Stewart was still able to write that upon receipt of five such new texts, the size of his listening library had just doubled.[13] So young is this field, in fact, that listening treatises are more likely to dispense advice regarding the importance of empathic listening than they are to provide a systematic methodology for the development of empathic skills. In a 1983 major text by Wolff, Marsnik, Tacey, and Nichols, for example, three "strategies to improve empathic listening" are recommended: (1) avoid judgment, (2) give the speaker time to speak without interruption, and (3) focus on the speaker.[14] Let us briefly look at these recommendations.

The first recommendation listed above, that the empathic communicator must avoid making comparisons or passing moral judgment, is obviously a useful step toward maintaining an empathic vantage point. Yet exactly <u>how</u> a communicator can learn to graduate from a response-set characterized by automatic judgment is not specified. While the advice given is not inappropriate, what does one do to implement this often-offered suggestion, to translate it from rule to practice? This is the crucial step, and the point at which our ability to be of assistance as communication professionals is truly limited. Aside from the Rogers paraphrasing exercise, what do we do to teach communicators how to suspend premature judgment in the midst of real-life daily social interaction? Of what methods does our pedagogical armamentarium consist in this area? I claim that we do not have a well-designed ample array of behavior-change strategies at our disposal for assisting in the modification of the evaluative response tendencies of human communicators. Paraphrasing, as our nearly singular tool of choice, is certainly neither comprehensive enough nor

penetrating enough to make much of an inroad in the alteration of a longstanding and well-entrenched cognitive response style anchored in judgmentalism.

The second recommendation, to be quiet as one allows the other communicator to speak without interruption, would seem more capable of immediate implementation than the advice to avoid judgment. However, it is not the mere absence of interruption of one communicator by another that creates empathy. An empathic atmosphere is engendered not so much by refraining from speech by the would-be empathic communicator as it is by the quality of the silence that is created. This, in turn, is a function of the content and style of the intrapersonal self-talk of this communicator, and the external display of key nonverbal messages sent through kinesic and paralinguistic channels. This is not likely to be taught by a simple suggestion to refrain from interruption.

The third recommendation often made by listening texts, and made in the text under discussion here, is that the empathic communicator needs to focus his or her attention on the speaker, and not distract from this focus by verbally calling undue attention to oneself or one's own situation. While this advice, as far as it goes, is sound, how <u>does</u> one learn to sustain attention on the other (and the "between") and not upon the self? Do our pedagogical manuals and methods prepare us to in fact enable learners at the behavioral level to conduct themselves in a less egocentric style during the ebb and flow of social intercourse? My tentative guess is that we do not foster a high degree of lasting behavior change in this response realm, or at least that gets generalized beyond the confines of the communication classroom.[15]

Of course our field is not the only one that is concerned with empathy development. Many of the "helping professions," including counseling, medicine, social work, and law have attempted training programs that have been aimed at increasing the empathic communication skills of practitioners in these fields.[16] One of the

standard approaches used in many of these training programs has been the analysis of audiotape recordings of the learners' attempts to use empathy in a real or simulated counseling context.

This writer was involved in such a training program in a graduate seminar on "The Counseling of Speech Anxiety." Each learner tape-recorded five sessions in which he or she attempted to counsel volunteer clients who were highly afraid of communicating in public settings. The counselor was to attempt to display those characteristics of the helping relationship identified to be important through the research of Truax and Carkhuff, including empathic responding.[17] Excerpts from these tapes were then rated, analyzed, and discussed freely in class, so that each learner could directly receive peer feedback on his ability to create conditions conducive to client change, including empathy. This process can be tedious and time-consuming, yet when subjected to experimental inquiry has often been found to be significantly effective in increasing the empathy level of counselor responses, as compared to those of a comparable yet untreated control group.[18] The problem is, however, that while this empathy skills training can indeed be useful in raising empathic scores relative to those of the pre-test (or of a control group), the scores of those completing such training programs are still not absolutely high on the scales usually used in these studies. Jacobs, for example, has reviewed eight studies (published in counseling journals) that are specifically cited as demonstrating the effectiveness of an empathy skills training approach.[19] Most of these training programs involved between twenty and thirty hours of training time. While in each case there is a statistically significant pre-post shift, the terminal level empathy scores in these investigations remain below a minimally empathic response, as defined by the scales used. As Jacobs notes, this is a "decidedly minor achievement."[20]

Not long ago I was talking with Dr. John Barkai, Associate Dean of the University of Hawaii Law School. Professor Barkai had recently published what he believed to be the only study of empathy training for law students.[21] He had devised a training program based on didactic lecture, class discussion, and role-playing combined with feedback. It was found that after this brief four-hour program, the learners scored higher than a control group on a simulated legal interview task, and employing written responses only. Again, however, it was found that the posttest mean for the experimental group was 4.91 on a nine-point scale, where 5.0 is supposed to indicate a minimally empathic response.

In short, in critique of the advice given by the listening treatises from our own discipline, we can say that being told to empathically listen is not the same as being taught to listen with empathy; and in critique of the empathy skills programs that are conducted within the helping professions, we can say that a significantly raised scale score still does not mean that empathy has been attained (as per the evidence cited above).

In addition to the limited effectiveness of the empathy training model that has been used to date, other criticisms of that model have been advanced. Plum, for instance, has argued that skill training often has a superficial aspect about it, a focus on the how but not on the what and the why.[22] In this sense, skill training runs the risk of any technology, and obscures a deeper understanding by substituting "quick-fix" verbal formulas. Many who learn to master "The Skill" will use it reflexly, even when it may not be the most appropriate and needed course of action. Others will learn to use the skill in a manipulative way to achieve personal gain, and convert what was intended as an "I-Thou" method into an "I-It" weapon. Plum prefers to retain the "education" model and to disfavor the "skill training" model, since "education" implies room for reflection, choice-making, critical response, self-direction, and imagination. Plum concludes his reaction

against the glib skillfulness model by saying "we must teach communication in ways that adequately reflect its complexities."[23]

Communication, indeed, is a complex subject matter, as is that form of communication identified as "empathic communication." Where does this leave us? In want of a systematic, comprehensive, multi-methodological approach to empathy-building. Yet empathy is needed at all levels of communicative functioning. Hunt and Cusella reported in 1983 that when the training directors of over a hundred business organizations were asked exactly what listening-related skills were needed within their companies, skills associated with empathy and active listening were perceived as being more important than skills associated with critical or deliberative listening.[24] In marital relationships, empathy appears to be decidedly important to the maintainence and enhancement of the intimate dyad over time.[25] In the teaching-learning context, empathy appears to be related to student learning, and to favorable teacher evaluation.[26] In physician-patient interactions, empathy would seem to be an important variable related to patient satisfaction and trust of the physician.[27] But probably nowhere is empathy more important than at the international level. There is some research to show, for instance, that militaristic individuals have a lower-than-average empathic tendency; this is dangerous for the well-being of humanity.[28] Although humans probably have an instinctual inhibition against intraspecies killing, they seem able to override this inhibition when they create the image that the "enemy" is in some sense less than truly human, i.e., is redefined as being of another species.[29] This is, of course, precisely what is done in much international rhetoric during these conflictual times.[30] I can conclude this paper in no clearer way than with the words of Dr. Kenneth Clark, who has urged his colleagues in psychology not only to study the nature of empathy, but to "develop the ability to increase the number of human beings who are functionally empathic. If this is done there will be a future for humanity. The survival of the human

species now appears to depend upon a universal increase in functional empathy. Trained human intelligence must now dedicate itself to the attainment of this goal."[31] We in communication studies also have our part to play in this enterprise. May we soon assume this challenge in an even more concerted fashion.

Footnotes

1. John M. Wiemann, "Explication and Test of a Model of Communicative Competence," Human Communication Research, 3(1977), 195-213. For a review of the role of empathy in help-intended communications, see Thomas Ashby Wills (ed.), Basic Processes in Helping Relationships (New York: Academic Press, 1982), ch. 15.
2. Benjamin J. Broome, "The Expression of Differences in Intercultural Encounters," ERIC research document, No. 207090 (1980); Brent D. Ruben, "Guidelines for Cross-Cultural Communication Effectiveness," Group and Organization Studies, 2(1977), 470-479.
3. Ronald C. Arnett and Gordon Nakagawa, "The Assumptive Roots of Empathic Listening: A Critique," Communication Education, 32(1983), 368-378. Three papers on empathy have been published since the Arnett and Nakagawa article: John Stewart, "Interpretive Listening: An Alternative to Empathy," Communication Education, 32(1983), 379-391; Brant R. Burleson, "Social Cognition, Empathetic Motivation, and Adult's Comforting Strategies," Human Communication Research, 2(1983), 295-304; and Ron Gordon, "The Effects of Perceived Mutual Understanding in Interpersonal Communication," Communication, 12(1983), 99-103.
4. Kenneth B. Clark, "Empathy: A Neglected Topic in Psychological Research," American Psychologist, 35(1980), 187-190.
5. Clark, p. 188.
6. Clark, p. 190.
7. Bill Underwood and Bert Moore, "Perspective-Taking and Altruism," Psychological Bulletin, 91(1982), 145-173.

8. Underwood and Moore, p. 166.

9. Ezra Stotland, Kenneth E. Matthews, Jr., Stanley E. Sherman, Robert O. Hanson, and Barbara Z. Richardson, Empathy, Fantasy and Helping (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1978), p. 111.

10. For a related critique of the research on children's role-taking abilities as these affect adaptive communication, see Brant R. Burleson, "Role-Taking and Communication Skills in Childhood: Why They Aren't Related and What Can Be Done About It," The Western Journal of Speech Communication, 48(1984), 155-170.

11. Mark V. Redmond, "Towards Resolution of the Confusion Among the Concepts 'Empathy,' 'Role-Taking,' 'Perspective-Taking,' and 'Decentering,'" paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Speech Communication Association, Washington, D.C., November 10-13, 1983. ERIC research document, No. 236748 (1983).

12. Underwood and Moore, p. 159. See G.T. Barrett-Lennard, "The Empathy Cycle: Refinement of a Nuclear Concept," Journal of Counseling Psychology, 28(1981), 91-100.

13. John Stewart, "Empathic Listening: A Symposium," Communication Education, 32(1983), 365-367.

14. Florence I. Wolff, Nadine C. Marsnik, William S. Tacey, and Ralph G. Nichols, Perceptive Listening (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983), pp. 63-71.

15. The need for research on the outcomes of communication coursework is discussed by Kathleen M. Galvin and Pamela Cooper, "Research in Communication Education: Directional Needs," Central States Speech Journal, 32(1981), 219-226; also see Ellen M. Ritter, "Accountability for Interpersonal Communication Instruction: A Curricular Perspective," Central States Speech Journal, 23(1977), 204-213.

16. For example, Richard W. Hubbard and John F. Santos, "Empathy Training As An Instructional Tool for Geriatric Health Professionals," Educational Gerontology, 6(1981), 191-194; Charles B. Truax and James L. Lister, "Effects of Short-Term Training Upon Accurate Empathy and Warmth," Counselor Education and Supervision, 10(1971), 120-124; Bernard G. Guerney, Jr., Relationship Enhancement (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1977).

17. Charles B. Truax and Robert R. Carkhuff, Toward Effective Counseling and Therapy (Chicago: Aldine, 1967).

18. Robert R. Carkhuff, Helping and Human Relations, Volume 1 (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969).

19. David Jacobs, "Successful Empathy Training," Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 21(1981), 39-56.

20. Jacobs, p. 40.

21. John L. Barkai and Virginia O. Fine, "Empathy Training for Lawyers and Law Students," Southwestern University Law Review, 13(1983).

22. Alan Plum, "Communication As Skill: A Critique and Alternative Proposal," Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 21(1981), 3-19.

23. Plum, p. 18. Also see Arnett and Nakagawa, pp. 372-373.

24. Gary T. Hunt and Louis P. Cusella, "A Field Study of Listening in Organizations," Communication Education, 32(1983), 393-401.

25. For example, see Nina S. Fields, "Satisfaction in Long-Term Marriages," Social Work, 28(1983), 37-41.

26. Susan E. Kogler Hill and John E. Courtright, "Perceived Empathy: Its Relationship to Selected Interpersonal Variables and Students' Interpersonal Laboratory Performance," The Western Journal of Speech Communication, 45(1981), 213-226; Margaret L. McLaughlin, Keith V. Erickson, and Margaret A. Ellison, "A Scale for the Measurement of Leaders' Affective Communication," Communication

Education, 29(1980), 21-32; Arthur Bochner and Janet Yerby, "Factors Affecting Instruction in Interpersonal Competency," Communication Education, 26(1977), 91-103.

27. Virginia K. Fine and Mark E. Therrien, "Empathy in the Doctor-Patient Relationship: Skill Training for Medical Students," Journal of Medical Education, 52(1977), 752-757.

28. Steven Kull, "War As A Species Disorder," Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 24(1984), 55-64.

29. I. Eibl-Eibesfeldt, The Biology of Peace and War (New York: Viking Press, 1979).

30. For example, see Robert L. Ivie, "Speaking 'Common Sense' About the Soviet Threat: Reagan's Rhetorical Stance," The Western Journal of Speech Communication, 48(1984), 39-50.

31. Clark, p. 190.